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**All Bush's Horses and All Bush's Men: How Far Should The U.S. Go To Help Put
Colombia Back Together Again?**

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Fundamentals of Strategic Logic
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All Bush's Horses and All Bush's Men: How Far Should The U.S. Go to Help Put Colombia Together Again?

The Bush administration's new National Security Strategy (NSS) singles out by name only eighteen of the world's 191 nations and of those only a handful merit more than a word. The NSS' focus on the potential threat from Iraq, relations with China, or potential conflict between nuclear adversaries Pakistan and India will surprise no one. Few Americans would consider Colombia as a nation in which they have significant national interests beyond, perhaps, a vague awareness of Colombia as source for their daily fixes of illegal drugs or coffee. But Colombia could soon loom large in the American mind: the NSS signals administration intention to link the U.S. battle against drugs flowing out of Colombia to its wider war against terrorism, a shift in policy that has implications for the expenditure of U.S. treasure, influence and, possibly, lives.

U.S. interest in Colombia prefigures September 11 but was focused by that date. The attacks of 9/11 underscored the threat posed by failed or failing states and which serve as potential launching pads for terrorist groups. Colombia, fragmented and wracked by violence, today teeters on the edge of implosion, raising the specter of a failed state on the U.S.' southern flank, posing a threat to U.S. national and regional interests. To defeat amorphous foes that include insurgency, terrorism, narco-trafficking and Colombia's own tortured history and help restore the security essential to Colombian stability, the challenge for the Bush administration is to find the right interventionist tools. Ironically, the legacy of past U.S. interventions in Latin America constrains U.S. options, and direct use of military force is not a realistic choice.

Two Hundred Years of Violent Attitude

Less than a thousand miles south of Miami, Colombia is a nation of extensive coastline and long, porous borders. It has an area slightly less than three times the size of Montana and a

population of 40 million. Natural resources include exploitable reserves of gas and oil.

Colombia's population is young (31.8% are under 14) and well educated, with literacy rates above 90%. Despite these advantages much of the populace (55%) is mired in poverty. Only 4% of the nation's land is arable, but 30% of Colombians earn a living from agriculture, subject to the vagaries of climate, as well as world prices for coffee and oil, Colombia's leading (legal) exports.¹ The root cause of Colombia's agony lies not in the unpredictable price of a cup of coffee, however, but in a history that has spawned a legacy of violence and insecurity.

Colombia achieved independence from Spain in 1810 and is the hemisphere's "second oldest-democracy." The nation exhibits a veneer of democratic stability with regular elections and peaceful government transitions; in the 20th century Colombians experienced only four years of military rule.² Beneath churns a violence born of structural weakness, geographic reality, and cultural burden. Colombia's political development is rooted in indigenous pre-Colombian societies whose "social structure [was] based on social inequality and on large concentrations of wealth – undemocratic societies in a word."³ Those hierarchical systems were reinforced by the *conquistadores*, who imposed an Iberian tradition of governance described as "authoritarian, absolutist, rigid, elitist, top-down, feudal, mercantilist and scholastic – as basically medieval."⁴

Colombia's democratic institutions were further weakened by geography. The Andes fragmented the nascent state and "political loyalty went to the regional *jefe* (boss)...not to the national government."⁵ Marcella and Schulz note "integration of Colombia's many regions into a coherent nation-state has been the principal challenge since independence."⁶ Displaced loyalty reflects as well in the development of Colombia's two dominant political parties. Vehicles for expressing views of "elites on issues such as the proper relation of Church and State or foreign investment versus internal development," the Liberal and Conservative parties stoked often-

violent political passions amongst their adherents on matters of parochial not national interest.⁷ Colombians today still speak darkly of “La Violencia,” a mid-20th century spasm of inter-party warfare notable in its brutality. Only after an estimated 200,000 were killed did “La Violencia” end in 1958, the Liberals and Conservatives agreeing to share power on an alternating basis through 1974.⁸ But “violence [remains] deeply ingrained in the Colombian personality and to root it out will be the work of generations.”⁹ As the ink dried on the document ending “La Violencia,” the seeds of the next phase in the cycle of violence were sprouting in the Colombian hinterland.

La Violencia Reborn: Comes Now the FARC and the ELN

In 1966, Manuel Marulanda, once a Liberal Party loyalist, founded the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (known by its Spanish acronym FARC), then a Marxist-Leninist insurgency. The FARC expanded slowly over two decades, operating in remote southern provinces far from urban centers, growing new “fronts” yearly and surviving Government of Colombia (GOC) efforts to eradicate the “communist threat.”¹⁰ A brief fling with legitimacy, through a political front that contested in national elections, ended badly in the late 1980’s, with the GOC purportedly assassinating FARC candidates and the FARC again ambushing military units.¹¹ FARC’s military strength grew significantly in the 1990’s; evidence is scant that more fighters have translated into increased popular support. Reliable public opinion polls put FARC support today at a dismal 2-3 percent.¹² Its growth into a force with an estimated strength of 18,000-20,000, despite a lack of political legitimacy, is almost certainly the result of ties to the organized drug trade. The FARC has developed “a stable and lucrative source of financing its activities...by extracting protection money from coca growers and the [use of] clandestine landing fields and laboratories...”¹³

The National Liberation Army (known by its Spanish acronym ELN), founded in 1964, is Colombia's "junior" Marxist insurgency, with ideological ties to Fidel Castro. The ELN is weaker than the FARC and today numbers 3-5,000 fighters, mostly operating in Colombia's northeast.¹⁴ The ELN has recently stepped up attacks on the oil pipeline that runs through its strongholds. This tactic is not new; ELN sabotage of the electrical power system in late 1999 and early 2000 was aimed at infrastructure and integral to its strategy of "bringing the war" home to Colombia's urban centers.¹⁵ Like the FARC, the ELN exploits the drug trade for funding, although the likely greater percentage of its income comes from kidnapping and extorting "protection money" from multinational oil companies.

Counterpoint: The Paramilitaries

Colombia is locked into a state of "hyperviolence." With some 30,000 murders committed in the last ten years, the State has virtually been powerless to protect Colombians.¹⁶ The GOC's weakness has "facilitated the unchecked growth, aggressiveness, and popularity of paramilitary organizations [which are] emerging in areas where the state is unable to guarantee lives and property...[and who] use terror against actual and suspected insurgents and their supporters."¹⁷ The tag "paramilitary" reflects the common perception that "self-defense" groups are cultivated by the military. Leaping into the fratricidal fray, the "paras" reportedly account for some 56% of all massacres committed in Colombia (as opposed to the 44% done by the guerrillas), according to a January 2001 report of the Colombian defense ministry. Human rights groups allege that the percentage of murders committed by the paramilitaries is much higher and the result of military complicity.¹⁸ Several "paras" operate under an umbrella organization, the United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia (Spanish acronym - AUC). In the bizarre wonderland of Colombia, the 8-

10,000 strong AUC mirrors the insurgency, deriving income from the drug trade, controlling territory, and seeking a political role for itself.

At the Precipice

How does one define a failed state? Jean-Germain Gros has devised a “taxonomy of failed states” that measures failure along a spectrum:

“by and large, ‘failed states’ ...might be assessed in terms of the following questions [*inter alia*]: is there a well-defined territory that is internationally recognized? Is there a polity whose social boundaries can be more or less delineated...? How effective is the control exercised by whatever authority structure lays claim over the territory and polity? In other words, do public authority figures have a monopoly over the means of coercion nationally, or are there parts of the country that are off limits?”¹⁹

Two of Gros’ “failed states identifiers” apply to Colombia. With the FARC, ELN, AUC and several smaller paramilitary and illegal drug groups operating with impunity over an estimated 40-50% of Colombian territory, the GOC has lost effective control over much of its writ.

Further, the GOC clearly has no monopoly over the means of coercion: “Annual noncombatant deaths reached more than 4,000 last year and...Colombia...bristles with weapons imported from all over the globe. More than 3,000 Colombians and foreigners were kidnapped in the country in 2001.”²⁰ Colombia, if not a failed state, is an “anaemic” one, “whose energy has been sapped by counter-insurgency groups seeking to take the place of the authority formally in power.”²¹

Plan Colombia: Medicine For An Anaemic?

In 1998, the Colombian electorate brought Andres Pastrana to power. In what was widely hailed as a courageous move by many – and naïve appeasement by some – Pastrana accepted FARC’s *de facto* control of a huge swath of territory in south-central Colombia in return for

peace talks. He also announced the launching of Plan Colombia, an ambitious effort to break the cycle of drugs and violence. Plan Colombia “links economic development and security to the peace process. The central premise is that drug money feeds the coffers of the guerillas, whose attacks give rise to...the paramilitaries. If the money going to the narcos is taken away, the guerillas cannot mount attacks, they become less threatening, and the paramilitaries have less reason for being.”²² Plan Colombia’s focus on drug production and trade would be supplemented by developmental assistance and reform of civil society. The price tag was fixed at \$7.5 billion over five years, with Colombia providing \$4 billion and the international community chipping in \$3.5 billion, to include \$1.3 billion from the United States.

Pastrana’s two-pronged strategy of talks with the FARC and eradication of the guerrillas’ sources of income has failed: “Coca and poppy cultivation has increased; alternative economic development programs have produced few tangible results; peace negotiations have collapsed; and the armed conflict has intensified with attacks on infrastructure and municipalities.”²³ The most damning judgment came from the Colombian people themselves: in May 2002, they elected Alvaro Uribe, who promised a much more confrontational approach with the insurgency. Dialogue was possible and even desirable, but it would be on the State’s terms and not at the point of the guerillas’ guns. The new danger today is that Uribe’s hard line stance will swing the pendulum too far over from Pastrana’s soft approach; confrontation alone could provoke a further descent into anarchic violence, yet another step on the road to a truly failed state.²⁴

Trouble in The Neighborhood

Why should any of this state of affairs matter to Americans? That Colombia hovers only at the edge of U.S. consciousness is historically consistent with the American tendency to generally take Latin America for granted. Americans may remember the Monroe Doctrine, declared to

keep the world out of “our backyard,” as the foundation for a “conceptual framework that we can call strategic denial.”²⁵ For nearly 200 years that framework served U.S. hemispheric interests well, bolstered by our presumed common values with our Latin “little brothers.”

The defense of the American prerogative in Latin America reflects our broad interests in the region. It is the most important market in the developing world for U.S. exports and by 2010 total U.S. trade with Latin America will exceed U.S. trade with Europe and Asia combined.²⁶ Within that context, Colombia plays a key part. Its legal two-way trade with the U.S. amounted to \$9.8 billion in 1999, the U.S.’s fourth largest trading partner in Latin America. In 1999, Colombia supplied 5.1% of U.S. oil imports. Colombians purchased \$3.6 billion in U.S. products (5th largest U.S. export market in Latin America).²⁷ Colombia’s economic performance has been solid. In the “lost decade” of the 1980’s, when Latin American economies lurched from crisis to crisis, Colombia sustained annual growth rates averaging just under 5%, carried a negligible public sector deficit and never defaulted on a debt.²⁸ It also promotes Western values. Uribe’s election underscored that Colombians treasure their democratic institutions, going to the polls even under the cloud of violence. Almost perversely, given its internal failings, Colombia has been an example to the region.

The Enemy at the Gates

Yet Colombia’s “insurgency, illegal drug-trafficking and growing vigilante paramilitary movements” threaten not only that country, but “also indirectly the stability and well-being of its neighbors.”²⁹ Threats to U.S. economic, political and social interests take several forms.

Colombia is the world’s principal producer (80 percent) and distributor of refined cocaine, the majority of which (70 percent) is exported to the U.S. market.³⁰ Colombia also supplies an estimated 75 percent of the heroin used on the U.S. East Coast.³¹ An estimated 5.7 million

Americans use cocaine. The economic, health and social consequences of drug use are severe, with the cost of “treatment, rehabilitation, lost productivity and other social pathologies estimated at \$160 billion per year.”³² To the accountable costs add intangible ones as the nation’s social fabric is torn by crime, corruption and death. This deadly flow continues even as the U.S. benefits from the cooperation of a functioning, if hobbled, GOC committed to drug eradication.

Failed states are feared as “breeding grounds of instability, mass migration, and murder, as well as reservoirs and exporters of terror. The existence of these kinds of countries, and the instability they harbor, not only threatens lives and livelihoods of their own peoples but endangers world peace.”³³ Phillip McLean observes, “If failed states on the other side of the globe threaten U.S. interests, then Colombia, a country just two hours by air from Miami...is truly a scary prospect.”³⁴ The FARC, ELN and AUC are all listed by the State Department as terrorist groups and are developing worrisome ties to the outside world. A U.S. Senate report recently linked the IRA to the killing of 117 Colombians in a church³⁵ and the LA Times reported in February 2002 that weapons traffic between Colombia and the Middle East is growing.³⁶ In September 2002 Army Brig.Gen. Galen Jackman of the U.S. Southern Command told a Senate caucus that the FARC was extending its reach into neighboring Latin countries.³⁷ Terrorists are also looking north. In 1999, the FARC deliberately executed three American indigenous-rights activists;³⁸ this June the U.S. took custody of FARC leader Carlos Bolas, who reportedly targeted the Americans.³⁹ At least 50 U.S. citizens have been kidnapped and another 10 killed in Colombia and the FARC blames “American imperialism” for Colombia’s troubles.⁴⁰

American economic interests are at risk. U.S. direct investment in Colombia is approximately \$8 billion and about 120 U.S. firms operate there. Colombian petroleum reserves

are significant and Occidental Petroleum, a U.S. firm, has the second largest foreign petroleum investment in the country.⁴¹ The ELN has repeatedly struck the pipeline running through Colombia's north and made clear that extortionate payoffs are the cost of doing business in areas under its control.

Colombia's instability is infecting its neighbors. Panamanian security forces are no match for well-armed guerillas and narco-traffickers that use Panamanian territory to conduct operations. Ecuador fears that its own local insurgents may link up with the FARC. Bogotá suspects that Venezuela may secretly support both the FARC and the ELN, given the leftist tendencies of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. Colombia's long and largely unguarded border with Brazil provides a safe-haven for the FARC and is a source of tension between the two nations.⁴² Drug money corrupts these already weak governments and money laundering is a regional growth industry. All Colombia's neighbors fear refugee flows should Colombia's internal situation continue to deteriorate. As Shifter notes, the U.S. should as well, with Colombians in significant numbers already fleeing to Miami.⁴³

Restoring Colombian Security

It is important to identify correctly the root cause of this witches' brew. The drug trade is only a symptom. So, too, are actions of the narco-traffickers and insurgents *cum* terrorists. The economic dislocations and poverty are symptomatic of one sad truth: the Colombian state does not provide elemental security for its people. From this absence of authoritative power all else springs: the violence, the drugs, the poverty and the despair. The solution is elemental: the GOC must be present to each of its citizens, in every province, in each town, village and urban barrio, not as "Big Brother" but in the first instance as the sole provider of basic security, holding a monopoly on the means of coercion. All other groups must be disarmed. Once it has assured

fundamental security, the GOC can proceed to its other responsibilities: providing equitable access to resources such as land, employment, credit, government services, and justice.

The Bush administration must keep in mind the end – establishing security throughout Colombia– when choosing means drawn from a menu of applications that includes the clearly non-military (i.e., counter narcotics and economic assistance), the direct, overt use of military force, or an ambiguous mixture (security assistance and intelligence). For too long the U.S. focused on symptoms when seeking to apply its arsenal of means to the Colombian conundrum.

Over the past 15 years successive administrations have chosen “counter-narcotics” as the principal means in dealing with the Colombian problem. From the “war on drugs” announced by the first President Bush through the Clinton administration’s embrace of Plan Colombia, most U.S. assistance has fallen under this rubric, making Colombia, by year 2000, the third largest recipient of U.S. aid in the world.⁴⁴ It has not been money well spent. A counter-narcotics strategy has three principal tools at its disposal: eradication (usually linked with crop substitution incentives), interdiction and education. Drug eradication, the focus of U.S. efforts in Colombia, has failed, with coca cultivation in Colombia now greater than in 2000.⁴⁵ Interdiction is a false hope; the U.S., with its long borders and thousands of miles of coastline, can never stop more than a small percentage of the drugs flowing into the country. Education – principally focusing on the problem of drug abuse at home – would address what is, after all, a classic case of supply filling demand. But that is a long-term solution, requiring political will and U.S. self-assessment, and a subject beyond the scope of this paper.

American economic assistance, technical advice and open trade could be an effective means to address economic structural problems and mold desired behavior. The Colombian economy is weakened by uneven distribution of wealth, a traditional cause of societal

resentment. But the U.S. must be careful not to put the cart before the horse. Security must precede the aid; before economic assistance and advice are proffered, the U.S. must be assured that it is not money poured down a rat hole.

Colombia's democratic institutions are weak, especially the judiciary, which borders on failure after years of assault by the narco-traffickers and the insurgents.⁴⁶ Strengthening democracy approaches the nub of the security problem: a failing judiciary highlights the weakness of the state.⁴⁷ A robust rule of law program should be continued and strengthened. Coalition building should be an attractive means. Colombia's neighbors are most threatened by its weakness and should be eager to help. But they are not, themselves weak and preoccupied with lagging economies and other internal challenges. Further, any sort of intervention in the affairs of a Latin American nation raises the uncomfortable ghosts of (principally U.S.) interventions past.

The difficulties of coalition building in Latin America underscores that the influence of America's "soft power" in the region is problematic. Latin Americans admire the power of U.S. ideas and principles, its economic vitality, its wealth, and its dominant position in technology. Certainly Latinos respect U.S. military might. But there's the rub. Much of Latin America resents U.S. power too often and easily used, in the minds of Latinos, against its weaker Latin America neighbors, for selfish interests. The resentment is such that many Latinos with no love lost for Fidel Castro and fully cognizant and disdainful of his tyranny, nonetheless secretly admire that he has thumbed his nose at the U.S. for forty plus years.

What About the Marines?

Several of the means and ways discussed above, employed to varying degrees over the last two decades, have proven largely ineffective. Others, such as coalition building, are likely

unavailable. Colombian violence goes unchecked and the drugs still flow like water. Does the U.S. walk away from the problem? Go back to the table and seek a new and more effective mix of policies? Or send in the Marines?

Committing the U.S. military to an operation in Colombia would require the Bush administration to ask itself complex questions and reach difficult answers. What are U.S. objectives in Colombia and how do they fit within the overall political setting in the world today, both domestically and internationally? The principal stated political objective would be to assist the GOC in establishing those conditions necessary to ensure the security of its people and avoid failure of the Colombian state, mitigating a significant threat to key U.S. national security interests. A second objective, flowing from the first, would restrict the influx of illegal drugs from Colombia to the U.S. A third would add Colombia's terrorists to those targeted by the administration's "war on terror." (An implied objective, linked to the third, would demonstrate that the "war on terror" is aimed not just at Muslims.) A fourth stated objective would be to prevent regional instability and protect U.S. commercial interests, including access to oil.

The current debate vis-à-vis military action in Iraq suggests that an overt military intervention in Colombia would be a hard sell domestically; the administration is constrained by a public (and Congress) with other priorities. The administration has painted Saddam Hussein as the devil incarnate but public support for war with Iraq remains uneven at best.⁴⁸ The enemy in Colombia will not be so easily identified and demonized. Americans may not much like the fact of drug use but tend to shrug it off as an inner-city problem. They will not likely support sending U.S. troops to fight a "war on drugs." A war to "stabilize Colombia and protect key U.S. interests, such as democracy, human rights, free trade and regional stability" might resound with pundits but will fall with a thud before a skeptical American public. The administration's ace in

the hole could well be terror, the war on terror providing an opportunity to move Colombia up on the list of national priorities. “After September 11, the U.S. (public) will naturally be less tolerant of chaos in the neighborhood” including the FARC taking urban warfare lessons from the IRA and Colombian money-laundering possibly funding international terror.⁴⁹

In Latin America, “any effort to build regional support for a military campaign in Colombia will be further complicated by skepticism about Washington’s motivation for expanding its already significant military presence...In Latin America, the U.S. armed forces are widely viewed as having been complicit in years of repression.”⁵⁰ Worldwide reluctance to support U.S. actions in Iraq serves as cautionary benchmark for any U.S. intervention in Colombia.

It is doubtful that the GOC would invite overt U.S. intervention. Daniel Primo describes Colombian –U.S. relations as generally cordial but historically “cool,” troubled by various irritants that that the U.S. will not “hesitate to act unilaterally with little or no regard for Colombian reaction.”⁵¹ Sweig adds that Colombia’s elites have “regularly raised the flag of national sovereignty whenever outside actors have tried to address the conflict.”⁵² While the U.S. would dispatch diplomats to the Organization of American States (OAS) and other international organizations in search of a fig leaf, insertion of troops in response to a collapsing state would almost certainly be a unilateral action.

In crafting a military strategy, the administration would have to consider the political objectives of the FARC, the ELN, the AUC, independent groups of narco-traffickers and, perhaps, Colombians fueled by nationalistic passion. Marulanda may still be motivated by ideology, while other FARC leaders lured by drug-generated wealth.⁵³ The assumption is that the FARC should, after fighting for nearly forty years, be taken at its word; i.e., that it seeks

“political power, nothing more – but nothing less, either. Not control of local mayorships or political power in Caqueta or Guaviare but in Bogotá, the center of power.”⁵⁴ The ELN has been fighting for a similar period, but is weaker; it could settle for a political negotiation that brings social change (such as land reform) and ensured access to, but not control of, the political process. The AUC also seeks a role at the negotiating table, its goals more modest – amnesty for alleged human rights violations, perhaps recognition as a political party. The narcos objectives: freedom from prosecution (or extradition northwards) and maintaining wealth.

A Lack of Symmetry

In Colombia, U.S. power would face off against foes whose combined personnel would amount to what would be found in 2-3 U.S. ground force divisions. The FARC would bring 18-20,000 fairly disciplined, well-armed and equipped men to the fight, the ELN 3-5,000, and the AUC 8-10,000 more. Well-armed bands of narcos aggregate an additional several thousand. Each group possesses very limited airpower. The war would be one of classic asymmetry: a powerful hegemon equipped with the modern tools of combat fighting small bands, with limited resources, operating on their own turf. The conduct of the war would be familiar to U.S. commanders who saw action in Vietnam and Afghanistan: guerilla conflict against foes hardened by decades of conflict.

The U.S. would be constrained by fighting on unfamiliar ground over jungle terrain not conducive to large-scale engagements. Tracking guerillas in remote provinces near the Amazon border would put U.S. forces far from ports and supply bases. Airpower would be of limited utility in tracking and interdicting enemy movements. Operations near international borders would risk unintended incursions into neighboring countries, with diplomatic repercussions. While the FARC has little popular support, the presence of U.S. troops deep in Colombian

territory could raise nationalistic hackles. Guerilla warfare would be drawn out, testing U.S. public support. The guerillas' chief constraints would include limited firepower, lack of advanced communication and intelligence tools, and little popular support for yet another round of violence.

Time Not On U.S. Side

The FARC and ELN have been fighting the GOC since the 1960's, generally avoiding set piece combat with the Colombian military. In the face of superior U.S. firepower both would reprise that tactic. Each would employ harassing tactics, attempting to disrupt infrastructure supporting the U.S. effort (supply lines, highways, electrical grids, ports) either through raids or terrorist tactics. The guerillas principal military objective would be to attrit U.S. capabilities and will and – by extension – tire the will of the U.S. people and government.

The U.S. military objective would be deceptively simple: disarm the guerillas and the narco-traffickers, leaving in GOC hands the sole means of coercion, a necessary precondition to the political objective of reestablishing security. As in any military campaign, the U.S. would identify centers of gravity (COG's), those of its adversaries and its own: accurate identification of COG's focuses the strategies and tools necessary to victory. The principal U.S. COG lies in its own people whose patience will be required to stay the course in a war of attrition. The secondary U.S. COG would be U.S. forces targeted by guerillas eager to raise body counts for American public consumption. U.S. tactics, then, would have to seek a speedy resolution limiting direct involvement of U.S. troops, not an easy task in guerilla warfare.

The opposing COG would be difficult to identify, the insurgents have diffuse central leadership, with dozens of fronts led by combatants with motivations ranging from ideology to greed. The same holds true for the AUC and certainly for the narcos, who are wholly

decentralized. The key center of gravity would not be adversarial forces but the Colombian people themselves who would need to support efforts to restore their security. A secondary COG would be the Colombian military whose capabilities the U.S. would want to strengthen. Only then could the U.S. effectively focus efforts on the last COG: the lawless elements infecting Colombia.

Victory Defined

Victory would find the insurgents, paramilitaries and narco-traffickers disarmed, the GOC in control of all its territory, prepared to address the inequities that foster discontent in partnership with Colombians secure enough to go about this business without fear. Getting to victory requires accurate assumptions about adversaries' capabilities and those of the U.S., including the types of forces the U.S. currently possesses or can quickly bring to bear. The U.S. would face 35,000-40,000 persons of differing skill, training and weaponry; they would not present a unified front. (The FARC and ELN might combine to fight the "Yanqui," but there is little chance that the AUC would enter into a marriage of convenience with its bitter rivals.) Possessing modern and powerful personal arms and a primitive capability to deliver ordnance randomly (such as was the case when the FARC launched crude mortars into neighborhoods near the site of Uribe's August 7 inauguration), these groups lack artillery, significant transport capability, strategic airpower, or real time intelligence on enemy movement. They are, however, motivated and skilled in fighting an asymmetric/guerilla war on their own turf.

The U.S. could bring division size formations to the conflict. As a practical matter that would not happen: a large-scale intervention would be politically difficult to sell internationally, especially in Latin America. With the U.S. already committed to a significant deployment in Bosnia and Afghanistan and war with Iraq looming, military resources would be stretched. The

character of the conflict – guerilla warfare in mountainous terrain – would in any event militate against a large insertion. That said, the U.S. would bring sufficient numbers to overwhelm any adversary head on but also a number small enough for effective skirmishing against an elusive foe. The U.S. has both the experience and capability to fight limited, guerilla warfare. The U.S. would rule the skies allowing it to move troops quickly, with firepower many times that of the enemy and usually far more accurate and effective. Space and airborne intelligence capabilities would offer a significant advantage in command and control. But – and this is a big but – the enemy would be hard to find, capable of easy concealment and, in some areas, enjoy popular support. Concerns for “collateral damage” and a ticking clock would degrade the advantage derived from the preponderance of U.S. power.

A U.S. strategy to force the groups to disarm would be multi-faceted. Attack the FARC and force it to abandon the comfortable rest, training and resupply camps it holds in the heart of the nation. The concept would aim for dispersal of the insurgents into smaller bands that could be targeted one by one, employing superior U.S. air and intelligence capabilities, linked to special forces units on the ground. In the north, the U.S. would have an additional duty beyond disarming the ELN: protection of infrastructure, including the oil pipeline and electrical grids, minimizing disruption of services to the civilian population. A third target would be the narco-traffickers who finance the guerillas; they would be captured or forced to flee, their financial assets seized and frozen, the destruction of coca and poppy fields following on. The paramilitaries would be given the choice of laying down arms or elimination. The nature of the terrain, coupled with U.S. intelligence capabilities, would often allow U.S. forces the element of surprise. In all cases, those suspected of involvement in terrorism and/or human rights violations would be handed over to appropriate authorities for trial.

The insurgents would likely employ a strategy that includes harassment, deception, terrorism and attrition. The essence of guerrilla warfare is “highly mobile hit-and-run attacks by lightly-to -moderately armed groups that seek to harass the enemy and gradually erode his will and capability.”⁵⁵ The FARC has a practiced guerilla capability with “a military strategy that appears to attack troops and police in remote and vulnerable positions, a pattern repeated [against targets with] no strategic significance to the FARC other than its psychological impact.”⁵⁶ The FARC also targets municipal officials; only recently it “suggested” that all of Colombia’s mayors resign or face the consequences, and several dozens took the hint.⁵⁷ To bolster the confidence of the local populace, U.S. forces would have to guard against this insurgent strategy, aimed at “instilling fear into officials and their domestic and international supporters.”⁵⁸ The FARC could call the U.S. to the negotiating table early on; its history indicates that the FARC wants to “win the war by using negotiations as a tactic,”⁵⁹ an approach consistent with what O’Neill calls the “strategic stalemate” favored by guerillas. Such a dual strategy – sporadic military strikes mixed with terror, followed by offers of negotiation would be consistent with the targeting and fatiguing U.S. public opinion, the key American COG.

Yanqui Don’t Come And, If You Do, Go Home

The overt use of American military force in Colombia against groups that use terror; encourage the drug trade; and threaten to turn an important U.S. ally into a failed state may be an attractive option. But it is not a viable one. There might be initial success: some terrorists and their supporters killed, the drug and money-laundering industries disrupted, a friendly government strengthened and stabilized. But the terror and drugs would simply metastasize elsewhere. Much of the cultivation of coca in Colombia is the result of successful eradication efforts in Peru and Bolivia – the trade just moved north. Terrorists would move as well, perhaps

to the “triangle” constituting the border of Paraguay, Brazil and Peru already allegedly home to some terror groups. The damage done to longer term U.S. interests in Latin America would be significant: the mantra that we have long preached concerning the importance of civil, not military, solutions to societal problems undone at a stroke. Unless the U.S. was willing to stay in Colombia for a very long stretch, reconstructing Colombian institutions, the success would be short-lived. Reassessing the situation midway through a U.S. campaign will already be too late. The time to reassess U.S. policy towards Colombia is now.

Three Keys To Success

The administration has already made one important strategic reassessment, agreed to by the Congress as well. Restrictions limiting Plan Colombia security assistance to counter-narcotics have been lifted and the funds can now be used for counter-insurgency training, including \$94 million to train the Colombian military to help protect an oil pipeline, a key source of GOC revenue and of national interest to the U.S.⁶⁰ But security assistance money should be spent as well on rebuilding the police forces and ensuring judges and prosecutors are present and protected throughout the nation. The administration (and Congress) should also lift the unrealistically low cap on the number of U.S. trainers now in country (currently set at 400 military and 400 civilian) in order to speed training.

The second prong of a successful strategy would employ targeted economic assistance. Colombian agricultural products such as coffee and cut flowers have a ready market here. Giving rural Colombians land and a real crack at the U.S. market is a win-win proposition. Assuming it can first convince domestic audiences, including Congress of the necessity, the U.S. should offer a quid pro quo: greater access to the U.S. market in return for equitable land

reform. Several observers have suggested as well that the U.S. extend and expand Andean Trade Preference Act preferences.⁶¹

The insurgents *cum* narco-terrorists, who make up the FARC and ELN, as well as their counterparts in the equally violent AUC, constitute an amalgam of ideological retreads, misty-eyed dreamers, cold-eyed opportunists, and hardened criminals. The challenge is to identify and separate out those who are amenable to reintegration into society from the hard-boiled for whom incarceration – or elimination – is the only alternative. Against that latter group the U.S. should offer its unmatched intelligence capability, the third element of an effective strategy. In fighting terrorists, intelligence is crucial to identifying leadership, hiding places, training and rest camps, and weaponry (both type and source). U.S. specialized economic intelligence capabilities would identify and freeze assets. Clandestine operations would infiltrate groups and neutralize the leadership. In the fight against al-Qaeda, this tool has been limited, given cultural and religious barriers. That will not be the case here; many Americans speak Spanish and understand the culture. There is potential risk and cost in this option. Outright assassination of insurgent leaders runs up hard against American values, as well as public opinion in Latin America, and covert operations on a large scale are not easily deniable. But done quietly and, with GOC assent, a mix of covert operations, security assistance and institution building both democratic and economic would prove more effective in establishing the conditions for security than an overt, open-ended military intervention.

The Better Angels of Our Nature

The best option is for the Colombians to help themselves. The first step on the road to recovery is self-recognition of a problem. Colombians seem to be “fed up with living in a chronic, dangerous, psychologically debilitating environment in which the absence of peace and

security has seriously hurt the national economy and international trade...Frustrated citizens, attracted to [Alvaro] Uribe's proactive "change" agenda to restore the authority of the state and to bring security to the country, elected [him] on the first ballot."⁶² News in the Colombian daily press has finally recognized a "nasty picture of criminal activities, far from the romantic image of the Latin American revolutionary."⁶³ Colombians seem to have embraced the idea of sacrifice in order to achieve security; the sons of the upper middle class could soon be liable for military duty and the very wealthy have seemingly accepted new taxes in order to pay for enhanced security. Human rights groups have criticized Uribe's plan to develop a citizen corps that will defend neighborhoods and towns against lawless activity, fearing a reprise of the paramilitaries. But if truly grass roots, and not a creature of the military, the plan should be given a chance, albeit strictly monitored to protect civil liberties.

In the last analysis, Americans want not only what is in their interest but also what is right. Perhaps Colombia is a political artifice, its borders lost in the vastness of the Amazon, its internal structure little more than loosely amalgamated fiefdoms paying lip service to Bogotá's authority. But a nation is also a people and this one proudly defines itself as "Colombian," pointing to a national literature (Gabriel Garcia Marquez its most renowned expression), democratic (albeit flawed) institutions, a free press and, Colombians insist, the world's most beautiful women. It offers the world much worth saving. Machiavelli warns that it is the wise prince "who not only watch(es) out for present problems, but also for those in the future, and tries diligently to avoid them; for once problems are recognized ahead of time, they can be easily cured; but if you wait for them to prevent themselves the medicine will be too late for the disease will have become incurable."⁶⁴ For its own many interests, the U.S. would be wise to act now in helping save Colombia from itself. It would not only be wise, it would be right.

NOTES

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